



LIVING DOLLS


STORY OF INDIAN PUPPETS

JIWAN PANI

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

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MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



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Preface

Puppets arouse in me two kinds of feelings. When they behave like human beings, they seem to be mocking at me. They exaggerate my shortcomings, trampling on which they go on capering in a Falstaffian way and make me laugh unknowingly at my own foolishness. When however they behave as themselves, they look mysterious. As if they were 'beings' of another world who sweetly persuade me to come crawling to theirs. And when I am there, their world looks like a multi-coloured small ball, extremely fascinating and entirely manageable. I feel great, enriched by the opening of the doors of other planes of reality and of other levels of experience.

Although I had the idea that puppets can take drama to great heights, it was not until 1980 when I attended the World Congress of UNIMA at Washington, that I came to know that puppet theatre can have such an amazing range and variety. Some of the puppet shows presented at the Congress had such aesthetic appeal that they were in no way less than any human theatre of high calibre. They helped reinforce my fascination for puppets.

As a child I was immensely impressed with the few puppet shows that I watched. I remember to have stealthily imitated some of the fascinating movements of the puppets. Gradually, puppet shows became quite scarce and I do not remember to have seen any puppet show between the late forties and mid-fifties. It was as if the puppeteers shied away from urban and semi-urban areas where movies had begun to be the craze of the entertainment-hungry crowds.

Towards late fifties I chanced to watch a Ravanachhaya show at Cuttack and that was my first exposure to shadow play. I was enthralled. Earlier I had not imagined that moving shadows could be so powerful, so dramatic, and so eloquent. I met the puppeteer after the show. He was a very simple and unassuming old man of about sixty years. He told me that he came from a remote village in the district of Dhenkanal

in Orissa. The fascinating shadow show lingered in my memory for many days. I had no chance of watching a puppet show after that till I joined the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, in the year 1970.

At the Akademi, I was initially given the delightful job of surveying and documenting the various forms of traditional folk and tribal performing arts including puppetry. The then Secretary of the Akademi Dr. Suresh Awasthi used to take a good deal of interest in traditional puppetry. When I narrated to him my experience of Ravanachhaya he, with a touch of excitement in his voice, advised me to lose no time in searching for the puppeteer, and to comprehensively document the shadow play through filming and sound recording. Thus began a mission which would culminate in the discovery and revival of a fascinating art form which would have otherwise languished and finally died in isolation.

I, along with my colleagues R. S. Malhotra the cinematographer, H. L. Veer the sound recordist and O. K. Sharma the photographer, set out to find the Ravanachhaya performer and to document his performance. All that I knew about him was that he lived in a village in the district of Dhenkanal. I hoped that somebody in Orissa would know more about him.

On reaching Orissa we found that very few had even heard the name of Ravanachhaya, let alone have any idea of the whereabouts of the performer. Even the Orissa State Sangeet Natak Akademi was of little help in the matter. Yet, we determinedly forged along on our search.

We reached the district headquarters town of Dhenkanal, the capital of an erstwhile princely state, and after which the district has been named. Our firm determination and persistence led us to the Stenographer of the Sub-divisional Magistrate whose wife belonged to the village where the puppeteer used to live. Though the man himself was not in a position to elicit us much, his wife enlightened us with the information that the name of the Ravanachhaya performer was Kathinanda Das and he lived in a village called Odasa which is about hundred kilometres away from Dhenkanal. Thrilled with joy we headed for the small sleepy village called Odasa.

Kathinanda Das looked a much neglected person. The tattered cloth he wore gave us an idea of the extent of his poverty. Though he was puzzled at first to find us calling on him, we saw a soft stir of happiness and excitement in his silent eyes when he learnt of our purpose. His hands trembled with excitement and age as he drew out a tin chest containing the Ravanachhaya figures. Rust had settled on its hinges, and

when he opened the box, it creaked. Kathinanda Das told us that he was opening the chest after 3 years. The creaking sound was like the groans of a dying art.

Out came from the tin chest dozens of innocent looking leather-puppets. They were covered by fungus growth. Kathinanda lovingly wiped the fungus with an oil soaked rag. He improvised a puppet stage, and soon after darkness set in, the Ravanachhaya show began. We held our breath. The show was fascinating. We were spell-bound how such simple looking leather made figures are capable of carrying drama to such dizzy heights. Their shadows acquired such rare lyricity.

When the villagers saw us filming, photographing, and tape-recording the performance of Kathinanda Das, their estimation of him shot up like a rocket. All at once Kathinanda was the most important person in the village. His esteem in the eyes of the villagers soared even higher when he performed in Delhi and received the coveted Central Akademi Award. When I write this preface, Kathinanda Das is no more. He left for his heavenly abode about a year ago. But fortunately, the art survives.

I have narrated this long story with the sole purpose of acquainting the readers with the present condition of many genres of rural performing arts of this country. The above story of Ravanachhaya could have been that of any other form of traditional puppet theatre or that of a folk or tribal form of art.

All these arts originated and grew up in an agricultural civilization. As industrialisation is making deep and rapid inroads, the values and taste of Indian society are changing fast. Many ancient forms of art are now unable to appeal to the taste of the common mass. Again, since the earlier feudal system has been completely replaced by democracy, the responsibility of providing sound patronage to any art is on the people. Under such a system it is likely that the most popular art will get the most encouraging patronage. Naturally, under presentday circumstances, if performing arts such as the various styles of traditional puppetry are to survive, they have to struggle alongside popular mass media. Institutions as the Sangeet Natak Akademi, on behalf of the Government, can only give moral and marginally financial support which may not be adequate for an art to live. Both qualitative and quantitative vastness and variety of this country's heritage in performing arts are as much its assets as liabilities.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, became increasingly aware that unless something urgent was done, a few forms of traditional puppetry would become extinct. In 1977 Smt. Kamaladevi

Chattopadhyaya became the Chairman and Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, the Vice-Chairman of the Akademi. Both are known for their abiding interest in traditional art forms. During their tenure the Akademi implemented a new scheme, viz. Preservation and Promotion of Puppetry. Initially, I was entrusted with the responsibility of supervising the operative aspect of the scheme.

The first elaborate survey of traditional forms of puppet theatre was done by Inder Razdan about two decades ago under the banner of Bharatiya Natya Sangh. Before I joined the Akademi, Govind Vidyarthi had initiated the working of the Documentation Unit and credit for locating authentic puppeteers of a few forms of traditional puppetry should go to him. I had the opportunity of working with him for about eight years. He travelled extensively throughout the country and came in direct contact with countless forms of performing arts. He is a storehouse of information upon which I have drawn many a time and Sri Vidyarthi has always been generous.

I am deeply indebted to all whom I have mentioned above and also to S. C. Bansal, the sound recordist, who together with R. S. Malhotra and O. K. Sharma enthusiastically cooperated with me in 1976 when I made the documentary film 'Chhayanatak' based on the shadow theatre tradition of this country. This film is in the Documentation Unit of the Akademi.

I gratefully remember all those puppeteers, informants, and scholars who unhesitatingly gave me the information I wanted. This monograph could not have been written had they not been so generous to me.

Most of the photographs used in the book were obtained with the courtesy of Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi.

Before concluding I must express my deep gratitude to Dr. S. S. Shashi and Smt. Bharati Mahadevan because had they not taken personal interest this monograph would not have appeared in book form so soon. My thanks are also due to Sri R. Sarangan and Sri J. Adalja who designed the book with great care. I am extremely grateful to Sri H. H. N. Tandon for taking keen interest in the production of this book.

Kathak Kendra
July 1986

JIWAN PANI

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Introduction

IN theatre there are two kinds of emotion. The audience may be moved either by the personality or impersonality of the actor. A fascinating kind of impersonality is acquired by the actor when he puts on a mask as in *Seraikela* and *Purulia Chhau* dances or when his face is treated with heavy and stylized mask-like make-up as in *Koodiattam* and *Kathakali* of Kerala and *Yakshagana* of Karnataka. This kind of impersonality of the puppet 'actors' fascinate the audience.

Puppets are 'actors' though not human beings. Nor are they merely bits of wood and rags. Just as mask is considered as 'the other face of man', so also we may consider puppet as 'the other being'. Since it is endowed with such extraordinary life of its own, it can carry drama to heights beyond the reach of human actors.

Puppet is, in fact, the mask complete, from which the human actor has withdrawn, not to be dissociated but to be united with subtler objectivity for exploring yet another dimension of theatre — yet another plane of reality.

Although puppets owe their articulation to human agency, at times, they surpass in theatricality. The West has now fully awakened to the immense theatrical possibilities of puppets. In the first decade of this century Edward Gordon Craig who greatly influenced modern theatre said, “The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of past civilization. But as with all art that has passed into fat and vulgar hands, the puppet has become a reproach. All puppets are now but low comedians ... ‘Puppet’ is a term of contempt, though there still remain some who find beauty in these little figures, degenerate though they have become ... And who knows whether the Puppet shall not once again become the faithful medium for the beautiful thoughts of the artists.”

What Craig hoped has actually happened in the West and one of the most interesting stories of the recent years has been the revival of interest in puppetry. The old traditional puppetry has been reinvigorated and puppets have been successfully introduced to many new spheres of activity, such as education, therapeutics, rehabilitation of handicapped children, propaganda, advertising, cinema and television. It has been now recognised that there is no limit to the power of puppets to provide aesthetic entertainment. In countries like the USSR, France, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Germany, Hungary, Poland, USA, Canada, Japan and Australia, contemporary puppetry is so developed that it claims equal status with that of human theatre.

Puppet theatre fascinates not only because they move us by their impersonality, but there are other deep

psychological reasons. We have all a strong desire to escape reality. Psychologists call it ‘wish fulfilment’. The puppet’s power of offering escape from reality through wish fulfilment is the secret of its surprisingly universal appeal which comes through identification, not with any of the puppets but with the puppeteer. Through this identification the audience enjoys the same sensation of power and authority as the puppeteer, though to a lesser degree. Puppetry helps to fulfil mainly three kinds of wishes:

(a) We all wish to have power over others. It is the wish to make ourselves felt by controlling others’ destinies. Accordingly the puppeteer creates his puppets and populates his own world. Perhaps he behaves as a despot or a god. May be he reveals a Hitler in himself, but undoubtedly absolute is the control over his kingdom. His power and authority is unquestionable.

(b) The other wish is somewhat the same as that of a father who aspires to fulfil in his son what he has missed in life. Therefore, puppets often perform such acts that we want to but can not do. This is a kind of ‘sublimation’.

(c) The wish to appear superior to others is no less strong in us. This is satisfied in puppetry mainly in two ways: by manipulating the puppets in such a way that the audience is puzzled and mystified to the extent that they ask themselves ‘how is it all done?’ and by exposing the weaknesses of fellow human beings through cruel caricatures.

Again, from the perspective of the spectators, puppet show presents a different world — a different plane of

reality. The puppets are something unfamiliar, not quite understood, but wonderfully small and insignificant — only bits of wood — and yet endowed with such extraordinary life of their own. This way the spectator indulges in a feeling of superiority — one of the most pleasant sensations that can be experienced. He feels as if he is the onlooker of an inferior race of beings who excite his curiosity as to how exactly they achieve their peculiar antics, while at the same time he can laugh at them with a slight sneer.

Because of these psychological reasons puppetry is very effectively used in correcting delinquency in children.

Rightly programmed puppet shows can be extremely satisfying purely from the aesthetic point of view. Puppets have the potentiality to surpass human beings both in theatricality and in grace, so much so that we are, at times, tempted to imitate them. Oliver Goldsmith, the reputed English poet, almost broke his leg trying to prove that he could jump over a broomstick as gracefully as a puppet. Many other great persons of highly refined sensibility have not only been impressed but inspired by puppet theatre. Goethe, the great German poet, was inspired to write *Faust* by seeing a puppet show based on the legend of Dr. Faustus. Shakespeare is said to have had puppets in mind when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In more recent times, Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian poet and dramatist who received the Nobel prize in 1911, wrote puppet plays. The last play that G.B. Shaw wrote — *Shakes versus Shav* — was perhaps for puppets.

Although the West had a much feebler tradition in

puppetry, it is now fully aware of its potentialities which offer immense scope as a powerful means of dramatic expression. It is, however, unfortunate that India which has an unbroken tradition of puppet theatre for more than two thousand years is yet to awaken to the desirability of reinvigorating this fascinating art. In the contemporary scene of performing arts, puppetry is perhaps the most neglected.

History of Puppetry

Many scholars are of the opinion that puppet theatre originated in India and it is from here that the art along with the epic themes migrated to other Asian countries. Richard Pischel in *The Home of the Puppet Play* (1902) says, "...it is not improbable that the puppet play is in reality everywhere the most ancient form of dramatic representation. Without doubt, this is the case in India, and there, too, we must look for its home." There are a few who do not agree with Pischel and say puppetry did not originate in India but in China or Greece or Italy. There are, however, a number of evidences to prove that puppetry reached great heights in India as long back as in the early centuries B.C.

An unmistakable reference to puppetry is found in the Tamil classic *Silappadikaram* written around 2nd century B.C. *Natyashastra*, the masterly treatise on dramaturgy was written by Bharata around the same time. He mentions two earlier dramaturgists, namely, Krisasva and Shilalin, but their works are not extant. In *Natyashastra*, puppetry has not been dealt with but the producer-cum-director of the human theatre has been termed as

Sutradhar which means 'holder of strings'. The word must have found its place in theatre-terminology long before *Natyashastra* was written and there is no doubt that it came from marionette theatre. This leads logically to the assumption that puppet theatre reached great heights and was very popular even before human theatre crystallised. Prevalence of human theatre in India is traced back to 400 years before Christ. Puppetry therefore must have originated in India earlier than 5th century B.C. No country can, perhaps, claim such a long tradition in this art.

That puppetry was very popular and impressive as an art in ancient India is evident from the way it has been referred to in poems, especially with metaphysical content. For instance, in *Srimad Bhagavata*, the God Almighty has been likened to a puppeteer who with three strings — *Sattva, Rajas and Tamas* — manipulates all the beings in the created universe.

The Sanskrit language has also taken a deeper view in naming these inanimate objects. They are termed as *Puttalika* or *Puttika*, both of which etymologically mean 'little sons'. Whereas the word 'puppet' is derived from the Italian word '*pupa*' meaning a doll. Derived from the root '*Put*', *Puttalika* or *Puttika* is a diminutive form of *Putra* meaning 'son'. The etymology thus suggests a 'life' contained in the puppets. *Pupa*, on the other hand, may anticipate animation through manipulation, but basically it points to an inanimate object. The etymological meaning of *Puttalika* has sunk so deep into the mind of traditional puppeteers that they usually keep the box containing puppets in their bedrooms and when a puppet

is 'old' and can not stand any more manipulation it is not just rejected and thrown. Chanting *mantra*, the puppet to be discarded is taken to a river and is assigned to the waves.

Puppet theatre contacts its audience in two ways. When the material structure of the puppet is stressed, its ambition to imitate human beings is to some extent ridiculed and as a result it produces a comic effect. But when the elements of life in the puppets are stressed, the emphasis is put on their mysterious origins and they produce a magic effect.

It is probable that the earliest appearance of puppets was in connection with religious ceremonies or as a medium of popularising religious legends. Even today, both in India and Java some forms of traditional puppetry have distinct ritualistic overtones. There are references to *chhayanataka* (shadow theatre) being used by preachers of Jainism and Buddhism to popularise their religious legends. In India as also in some temples of Egypt and Greece statues were constructed which could make movements under the direction of concealed controls. Similar figures existed in medieval Europe; and among African tribes, idols have been found which could be secretly operated. This leads to the assumption that puppets were originally, like masks, ritual objects representing gods.

As civilization advanced it was recognised that puppets do not only mystify, they also do entertain. Gradually they started coming out of the temple precincts and appeared before their audience as 'actors'; but were not totally emancipated from their original legacies.

Some puppeteers who wanted to free themselves from the yoke of tradition started to feel that the puppet is particularly suited for mimicry and satire. They put more stress on the material structure of the puppets than on the elements of 'life' in those stylized figures. Thus the fashionable puppet theatre, especially in European countries, took shape towards 18th and 19th century, and acquired a sophisticated charm with an emphasis on comic effect rather than magic effect.

During early years of the 20th century some artists 'discovered' puppetry to be a worthwhile artistic and dramatic medium and accorded it a serious respect which it had never enjoyed before. Educationists joined the artists in welcoming puppet theatre as a means of self-expression and as a vehicle of instruction.

Types of Puppets

A puppet may be defined simply as an inanimate figure which is articulated by human agency. Thus it is different from dolls which are children's playthings and also from automata which are moved mechanically.

It is, however, not easy to define the art of puppetry. Generally, puppetry is included among theatre arts next to drama, ballet, pantomime and opera. Henryk Jurkowski, an eminent contemporary puppet theatre thinker of Poland, does not agree to such a definition. He, in his well written article *The Language of the Contemporary Puppet Theatre*, writes, "this is not right, as the puppet theatre stands in opposition to the theatre

art, performed by live actors, singers, dancers etc. The puppet stands in opposition to the man". Nevertheless, accepting the well-established stereotype he defines puppetry as "a theatre art, the main and basic feature differentiating it from the live theatre being the fact that the speaking and performing object makes temporal use of the physical sources of the vocal and motor powers, which are present outside the object. The relation between the object (the puppet) and the power sources change all the time and their variations are of great semiological and aesthetical significance".

Detailed discussion of the controversy whether puppetry is a form of theatre art or not is beyond our scope. Therefore, we consider here only the puppets and their various types.

Considering difference in design, mode of manipulation and presentational techniques, puppets are basically of four types: glove-puppet, rod-puppet, string-puppet and shadow-puppet.

Glove-puppets, also known as hand-puppets, are the simplest, but that does not mean they are less fascinating. Generally, glove-puppet is a miniature figure having a movable head and arms with a long flowing skirt as a part of its costume. The puppeteer wears the puppet like a glove and while his index finger manipulates the head, his thumb and middle finger control the arms. The mode of manipulation and construction of the puppet will differ if the glove-puppet is intended to represent an animal. For instance, if it is required to represent a frog the puppet figure may be conceived in such way that for articulation

only its jaws will move. In that case the figure will be so constructed that while the thumb moves the lower jaw, the other four fingers together move the upper jaw. The puppeteers manipulating glove-puppets usually hide behind a head-high screen and push up their hands to manipulate the puppets so that the audience see only the puppets and not puppeteers. Indian traditional glove-puppeteers, however, do not hide themselves behind a screen. They squat on the ground and manipulate the puppets in full view of the audience.

Rod-puppet is an extension of glove-puppet, but often much larger with a full-length rounded figure supported and manipulated by concealed rods from below. Its movements are sometimes limited as compared to string-puppets, but control is absolute and broad gestures of rare beauty can be obtained. In India traditional rod-puppeteers, however, hide behind a head-high screen and push up the puppets they manipulate. In Japan there is a kind of traditional rod-puppet, known as *Bunraku*. The *Bunraku* puppeteers do not hide behind a screen and like Indian glove-puppeteers manipulate their puppets in full view of the audience. Nowadays, in different parts of the world, many puppets are found which admirably combine the techniques of both rod and glove puppets.

String-puppets are also known as marionettes. Recently there is a trend of using the word 'marionette' as a synonym of puppet and not limit it only to string-puppets. Although some scholars are of the opinion that string-puppets are the most ancient, others say shadow-puppets originated earlier. Of course, sufficient evidence of historic development of puppets has not yet been

gathered to ascertain their origin, but from what is available the former opinion seems to be most probable. String-puppets with a complete figure and jointed limbs manipulated by strings from above allow a far greater flexibility for body and head movements. Originally perhaps they were controlled by one rod or stout wire for the head, and strings for the hand. Later the general method of manipulating string-puppets came to be by strings alone. In recent years manipulation technique of string-puppets, especially in European countries, has become quite complicated so as to obtain a high degree of naturalism and perfection.

The performance of shadow-puppets is known as shadow play or shadow show. It is now more appropriately called shadow-theatre. Some scholars believe that this kind of puppetry originated in China while others are of firm opinion that it evolved in India earlier than in China. The history of shadow-theatre in India will be discussed later. In this kind of puppetry flat figures, usually made of leather, are pressed on a translucent screen and manipulated with a strong source of light behind. The audience sitting on the other side of the screen does not see the puppets but their moving shadows on the screen. If the flat figures are made of translucent coloured material then they throw beautifully coloured shadows on the screen. Limited of necessity to a highly stylized convention, the shadow theatre has proved itself an artistic medium of rare and delicate charm. The jointed limbs of the flat figures are moved by horizontal rods and the light source is so placed that the shadows of the manipulating puppeteers do not fall on the screen.

India being the home of puppetry, all types of puppets are found here in many forms which have unbroken tradition of several centuries. But unfortunately they languish in utter negligence. Glamorous mass media for entertainment have pushed them to the remotest corners. It is a wonder that they still survive with a full range of variety in

spite of the fact that many forms of traditional puppetry in India have become extinct. Those forms of traditional puppetry which now survive and could be discovered in remote rural areas after a good deal of search by many sensitive and dedicated workers in the field will be now discussed.





Glove puppet of Orissa: Radha

Three-Dimensional Puppets

Glove-puppets

THE tradition of glove-puppets survives now in Orissa and Kerala. Survey reveals that it was also prevalent in Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, although no authentic traditional puppeteer could be located yet. Even nowadays, many villagers of Uttar Pradesh remember to have seen the glove-puppets. There were two very popular puppet-characters known as Gulabo and Sitabo. Their modern versions can be found, but not the genuinely traditional ones. A very few traditional glove-puppeteers, however, have been identified in Orissa and Kerala. The performance of glove-puppets in Orissa is called *Kundhei-nacha* and in Kerala as *Pava-Kuthu* or *Pava-kali*.

A form of glove-puppetry was being practised by a few puppeteers of Tamil Nadu until a decade or two ago. Now it is rather difficult to locate a traditional puppeteer of this style. From the scant references available, it is known that

this style of glove-puppetry had a one-play-repertoire, the story of which was based on the love of Valli and Lord Murugan who is also called Subramanya in the south and Kartikeya in north India.

Kundhei-nacha of Orissa

Literally *Kundhei* means a doll and *nacha*, dance. There are only two puppets; one representing Krishna and the other Radha, but they are now so humanised that at times they act like any rural boy and girl in love.

Once upon a time *Kundhei-nacha* most probably drew exclusively from Krishna legend. In 12th century when poet Jayadeva wrote *Gita Govinda*, Krishna-Radha theme became extremely popular in Orissa for dramatic presentation. Krishna-cult became more and more popular and reached its peak in 16th century when not only theatre but all branches of art and literature were influenced and inspired by it. During this period, it is likely that both glove and string puppet traditions of Orissa adopted exclusively Krishna legend as their thematic content. In 16th century five highly talented and devout Vaisnava Oriya poets, known as *Panchasakha*, wrote many poems based on Krishna legend. Although metaphysical, these verses became extremely popular since they were written in simple colloquial Oriya. These poems provided ample material for both live and puppet theatre. In 17th and 18th century Oriya poets, following the Sanskrit literary tradition, wrote highly ornate poetry. Many *kavyas* and short poems written during this period were free from religious inspiration. The heroes and heroines of these *kavyas* are

not Krishna and Radha nor are they any god of Hindu pantheon and his consort but they are fictitious princes and princesses. Short poems of this period did not confine themselves to the allegorical love of Krishna and Radha. They were written in such a manner that the *nayaka* and the *nayika* can be either mortals or immortals. All these traditional Oriya *kavyas* and short poems are meant to be sung as they have been written in various stereotyped metrical patterns, each suitable for a specified *raga* of the Odissi school of music. The glove puppeteer uses many such poems based on *nayaka-nayika* theme, but for him the *nayaka* is always Krishna and the *nayika* is Radha.

Kundhei-nacha group comprises only two persons; one puppeteer proper and the other drummer-cum-puppeteer. At times the drummer holds one of the two puppet figures and plays the barrel-shaped two-faced drum called *dholak* only with one hand. While manipulating the puppet figure, he occasionally plays on the other face of the drum with the hand that is wearing the puppet when it appears as if the puppet is playing the *dholak*. This act immensely amuses the audience.

No stage is required for presenting *Kundhei-nacha*. The puppeteers do not hide themselves behind a curtain. They sit anywhere on a mat on level ground and manipulate their puppets in full view of the audience.

There is not much drama in a *Kundhei-nacha* show. Nor is the manipulation technique in any way complicated, although, at times, it is quite imaginative. Its main appeal is in the singing and the literary content of the

songs. Interspersed humorous sequences enhance its appeal to a great extent.

Pava-kuthu of Kerala

In Malayalam, the regional language of Kerala, *Pava* means a doll or a puppet, and *Kuthu* means dance. Theatrically *Pava-kuthu* is richer than *Kundhei-nacha* of Orissa.

The art of *Pava-kuthu* is now practised by only a few families that live in the village named Paruthipully in the district of Palghat. These hereditary puppeteers, generally called *Andipandarams*, speak Malayalam, although their mother-tongue is Telugu which they speak at home. Their ancestors seem to have migrated some centuries ago from Andhra Pradesh. Earlier, the puppet figures were probably conceived and designed in a different way from what it is today. In 17th century the *Kathakali* theatre originated in Kerala and soon became extremely popular. In India there has always been a good deal of give and take between theatre and puppet theatre traditions. Around 18th century *Pava-kuthu* was so influenced by *Kathakali* that the puppet figures not only began to be designed like *Kathakali* actors, but the form of puppetry also started being called *Pavakathakali*.

The Kerala glove-puppets are highly stylized figures as they are modelled exactly like *Kathakali* actors who wear heavy and mask-like facial make-up, fascinating head-gears and extremely colourful and exaggerated costumes.

Glove puppet of Kerala: a puchcha character



Plays written for Kathakali performance are known as *atta-kathas*. *Pava-kuthu* puppeteers generally base their performance on *atta-kathas* and the musical accompaniment is exactly like that of *Kathakali* performance.

As in *Kundhei-nacha* so also in *Pava-kuthu* no stage is required for presenting the show. Nor do *Pava-kuthu* puppeteers hide themselves behind a screen while manipulating the puppets. Usually *Pava-kuthu* is performed at night. The main puppeteer sits on the level ground behind an oil lamp, flanked by associate puppeteers and instrumentalists. The chorus sits behind the main puppeteer who usually holds two puppets on both his hands and manipulates them. At times when more than two characters are required to be brought into play one or two associate puppeteers join.

Before the puppet play proper begins, bright percussive music accompanies the preliminaries known as *Kelikottu*. Like in Kathakali, themes for the puppet plays are drawn from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other puranic literatures.

Rod-puppets

Traditional rod-puppets are now found only in West Bengal and Orissa. In both Tamil Nadu and Karnataka a kind of traditional puppet is found which is manipulated both by string and rod. The hands of this kind of puppet figures are attached with rods, but they are suspended by strings and manipulated from above. Therefore, they do not strictly come under the category of rod-puppets which are supported and manipulated by rods from

below. These will be discussed under 'string-puppets' to which type they more appropriately belong.

While in West Bengal the rod-puppet show is known as *Putul-nach*, in Orissa it is *Kathi-kundhei-nacha*.

Putul-nach of West Bengal

West Bengal had a strong tradition in this type of puppetry. In Nadia district rod-puppets used to be of human size. This form is now almost extinct, and that which survives uses puppets of about 3½ to 4 feet in height. Usually they have 3 joints. The head is jointed at the neck and both hands at the shoulders. Only a few figures, such as dancers, have joints also at the elbows.

The technique of manipulation is interesting. A bamboo-made hub is firmly tied to the waist of the puppeteer. On this hub the rod that supports the puppet figure is placed. The puppeteers, each holding a puppet, stand behind a head-high curtain. Usually mats made of bamboo or a special kind of tall grass are used as the curtain. While manipulating the rods attached to the head and hands, the puppeteers also move and dance, imparting corresponding movements to the puppets. Simultaneously, they sing and deliver prose dialogue in a stylized recitative manner, each for the puppet-character he is manipulating. A group of musicians, usually 3 to 4 in number, sitting at the side of the stage provide the accompanying music with a harmonium, drums and cymbals. The music, style of delivering the dialogues, costumes which the puppets wear, all have a close similarity with Bengalee *Jatra*, the most popular, vital and fascinating

form of folk theatre prevalent in the State. It is evident that there has been a continuous exchange between *Putul-nach* and Bengalee *Jatra*.

There are about a dozen plays in the traditional repertoire of *Putul-nach*. Most ancient of them are, perhaps, the plays based on *Ramayana*. The other plays, such as *Satee Behula*, are based on legends of which a few are peculiar to Bengal and are favourites of *Jatra* theatre as well.

Some puppets fascinate the audience because they are so ingenuously articulated. Rod puppets of West Bengal do not come under this category. Their appeal depends not on manipulating dexterity but on the histrionic talent of the puppeteers.

Kathi-kundhei-nacha of Orissa

Literally *Kathi* means a rod while *Kundhei* and *Nacha* respectively mean doll and dance. Thus *Kathi-kundhei-nacha* means the dance of the dolls attached to rods.

Compared to the *Putul-nach* figures, the rod-puppets of Orissa are much smaller in size. Usually they are about 12 to 18 inches. Most of these puppets have joints at the neck and two shoulders. While the head of the puppet figure is attached to a rod by which it is manipulated, the hands are usually tied to strings. Thus elements of rod and string puppets are combined in this form of puppetry, but the puppets are manipulated not from above but from below. Therefore, this form of puppetry is more appropriately grouped under the rod-type.



Rod puppet of West Bengal:
a dramatic scene from the play
'Satee Behula'

Unlike the *Putul-nach* puppeteers who stand and manipulate, the rod-puppeteers of Orissa squat on the ground behind a screen while manipulating the puppets. The technique of manipulation, though not complicated, is imaginative. At times, using simple yet effective technique the audience is kept spell-bound, such as, when goddess Durga drives her spear deep into the chest of demon Mahishasura, or when Rama's arrow pierces the heart of demoness Tadaka.

The *Kathi-kundhei* performance is highly operatic in its verbal elements since most of the dialogues are sung and impromptu prose dialogues are infrequently used. The music admirably blends folk tunes with classical Odissi tunes.

The performance begins with a short preliminary invocatory orchestral music called *stuti* which literally means 'eulogy'. After the preliminary the puppet-play is presented. Themes of these plays are based on episodes from puranic literatures and epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Srimad Bhagavata*, etc.

String-puppets or Marionettes

The word 'marionette' was earlier used to denote string-puppet alone. Now it is used for any type of puppet. Therefore, according to the current usage, puppet and marionette are synonymous.

The tradition of string-puppet theatre is widespread in the country with a variety of themes and techniques of manipulation. This type of puppets having jointed limbs controlled by strings allow far greater flexibility and are therefore most articulate of the puppets. Although the technique of manipulation of string-puppets is more complicated than that of any other type of puppets, according to available evidences this type seems to be the most ancient. However, some scholars are of the opinion that shadow-theatre evolved earlier than string-puppets, but their assumption does not hold much water. As discussed earlier, the word *Sutradhar* used in *Natyashastra* in the context of human theatre, must have come from the ter-



*Rod puppets of Orissa: manipulation technique:
Durga killing Mahishasura*

minology used in string-puppet theatre. This proves that string-puppets existed long before 2nd century B.C. There is no such strong evidence to prove that shadow-theatre was prevalent anywhere in the world before string-puppets evolved in this country. This will be again discussed in the chapter dealing with shadow-theatre.

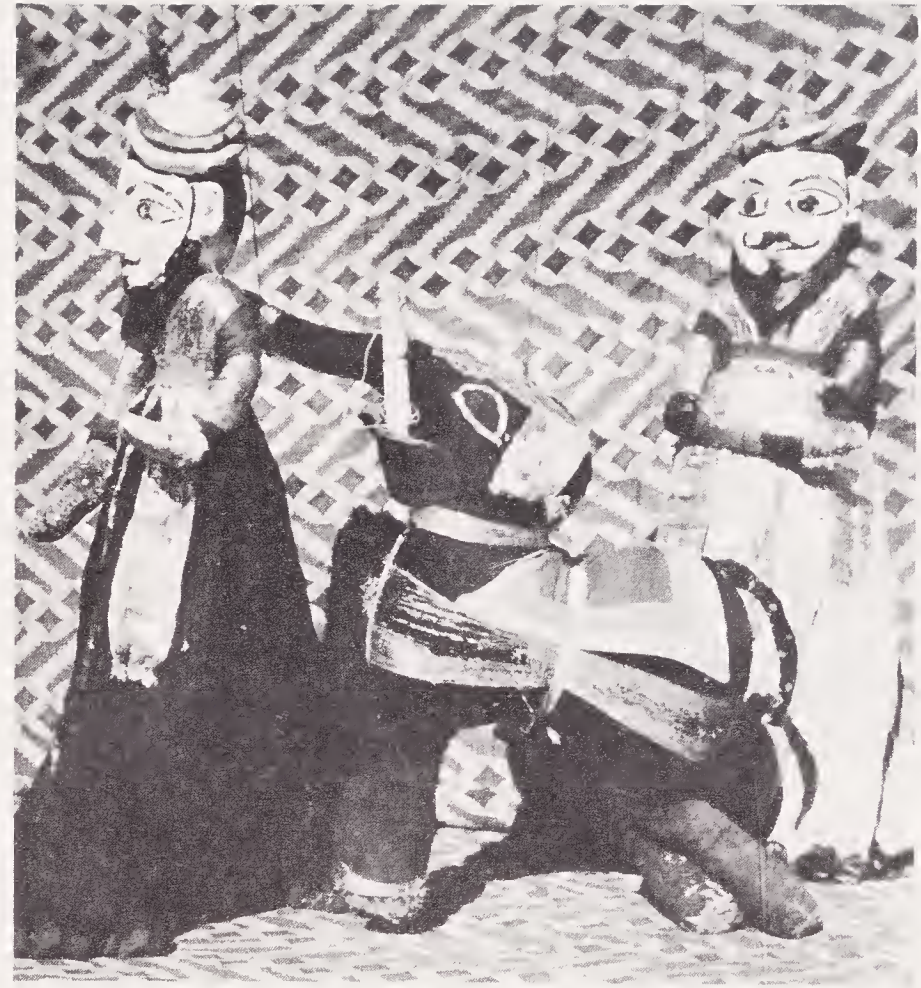
In India the tradition of string-puppets still survives in Rajasthan (*Kathputli*), Orissa (*Sakhi-Kundhei*), Maharashtra (*Kalasutri-bahulye*), Karnataka (*Gombe-atta*), Tamil Nadu (*Bommalatam*), and Assam (*Putla-nach*).

Kathputli of Rajasthan

Rajasthan string-puppets are known as *Kathputli*. The neck, face and head of a puppet figure are carved out of a single piece of wood. Often the head is so carved as to suggest that the puppet is wearing a headgear. The puppet figures have elongated stylized eyes and their faces are usually painted yellow; only a few figures have white faces. The torso and the hands are made of stuffed rags. Although the hands have no joints, since they are made of rags and sewn at the shoulders, there is no difficulty in articulating them through manipulation of strings.

Kathputlis have no legs but this is not felt to be an inadequacy. They are draped in long trailing skirts and articulated so skilfully as to suggest movement of legs inside the trailing skirt. This suggestion reaches a great height when the court-dancer performs her delightful number.

Upper garments of the *Kathputlis* approximate the



Kathputlis of Rajasthan

medieval Rajasthani dress. Traditionally they perform only one play based on the popular story of a legendary hero named Amar Singh Rathore who is believed to have lived during the rule of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan. Decades ago, perhaps, the story was presented in greater



*Kathputlis of Rajasthan
with the traditional puppet stage*

details, but now it takes only 5 to 10 minutes. The show devotes a longer time to present what happens in the court of the emperor where magicians, acrobats, dancers, snake-charmers, etc., come one after another to perform. Since manipulation of these puppet performers can easily mystify the audience they became very popular in rural areas and claimed more time than the play proper.

The music of *Kathputli* theatre is drawn heavily from

the rich and varied folk music of Rajasthan. The puppeteers while speaking for the puppet characters use a kind of whistle known as *Boli*. It is made by stretching a thin rubber tape in between two thin bamboo strips tied firmly at both ends. When held between the teeth and lips and blown, the rubber tape acts like a reed and produces a shrill note. When prose dialogues are spoken through it the speech acquires an interesting and weird character. At times the puppeteers blow it to produce a shrill trilling sound which helps in establishing an otherworldly atmosphere.

Kathputlis are manipulated by traditional puppeteers with great dexterity and imagination although most of them are articulated with only three strings. A few puppet characters, like the court-dancer which are required to make very complicated movements, are attached with five to seven strings, but the traditional Rajasthani puppeteer never uses any kind of prop for manipulation of the strings which are usually tied to their fingers.

Kathputli theatre, as it survives now, is not very dramatic since its play proper has shrunk to the minimum, but it never fails to fascinate and entertain the audience with trick puppets, such as, the juggler with balls, horse rider, and the *Bhand of Jaipur*. A mask-maker with two faces, one of a man and the other of a woman is very popular. The two faces are carved back to back, or alternatively, neck to neck. The opposite face is presented to the audience by skilful manipulation. If the two faces are carved neck to neck, the puppeteer gives a swift turn to the figure so that in the twinkling of an eye the male figure becomes

a female one. If, however, the faces have been carved back to back, the puppet figure is so draped that one face remains hidden under the skirt. When the puppeteer deftly inverts the figure, the skirt covers the first face and exposes the other one. These trick puppets fascinate any audience, be they rural or urban.

Sakhi-kundhei of Orissa

In Oriya *Sakhi* means a female companion and *Kundhei* a doll. It is not clear why the epithet *sakhi* is used to designate string-puppets. Some surmise that since traditional string-puppet theatre of Orissa earlier used to present shows based exclusively on Krishna legend and Gopis are generally alluded to as *sakhis* of Radha, the heroine, the puppet theatre came to be known as *Sakhi-kundhei-nacha*. The surmise, however, does not seem to be quite convincing. According to another opinion, *sakhi* is often used as a term of endearment. Since the puppet figures are cute beautiful dolls and seem to acquire a kind of 'life' when manipulated, they are called endearingly as *Sakhi-kundhei*. Although the later surmise appears to be more probable, it does leave some room for doubt. This string-puppet theatre is a fascinating tradition and fortunately survives in some remote rural areas of Orissa. So far only a few groups of traditional puppeteers have been located.

Sakhi-kundhei puppets are made of light wood and like *Kathputlis* have no legs but long flowing skirts. They have, however, more joints as the hands and the torso are also made of wood. Puppet figures representing major

characters have joints at their neck, shoulders and elbows. Five to seven strings attached to a puppet figure are usually tied to a triangular wooden prop.

The conception of the puppet figures is inspired by temple sculptures of Orissa, but the costume is more or less similar to that of the *Jatra* folk theatre of the region, which is different in many respects from the Bengali *Jatra*. It is more operatic in character and songs dominate over prose dialogues which are, more often than not, impromptu. The music of *Sakhi-kundhei* theatre draws heavily upon folk tunes of the region. At times, it is blended with sophisticated Odissi music and singing style is close to that of the traditional singing of *Chhandas*.

Most of the traditional puppet-plays are based on Krishna legend. There are, however, a few plays based on episodes from *Ramayana*, which seem to have come into the repertoire much later.

Bommalatam of Tamil Nadu

Bommalatam literally means the dance of dolls. So far as conception and design of the puppet figures are concerned, *Bommalatam* has two styles: Tanjavur style and Kumbakonam style. The main difference is that while the puppet figures of the former are highly stylized, that of the latter are more realistic. The presentational and manipulation techniques of both the styles are, however, similar.

The *Bommalatam* puppets are perhaps the largest and the heaviest of all traditional Indian string-puppets. A puppet may be as big as 4½ feet in height and weigh

about 10 kilograms. They have full rounded figures with joints usually at the shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, ankles and in some puppets even at the wrists.

In manipulation technique *Bommalatam* admirably combines elements of both string and rod puppets. They are suspended by strings and manipulated from above unlike rod-puppets which, as discussed earlier, are supported by the main rod and pushed up above the head level of the puppeteer and manipulated from below. Although *Bommalatam* puppets are suspended and some jointed limbs manipulated by strings, two rods are usually attached to the hands of the puppets representing major characters in the puppet play. The strings from the puppet are tied to an iron ring that fits the turbaned head of the main puppeteer like a crown. The rods attached to the hands are usually in charge of the main puppeteer. When the puppet is required to move its jointed limbs other than the hands, one or two associate puppeteers join the main puppeteer to manipulate the figure.

Traditional *Bommalatam* plays are based on episodes from epics and puranic literature. Like traditional human theatres of this region the *Bommalatam* performance first presents preliminaries beginning with *Vinayak Puja*, that is, worship of the elephant-headed god Ganesha. The music of *Bommalatam* theatre is a blending of folk and Karnatic classical music.

This type of puppets are also found in the adjoining states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. In concept and



String puppet of Tamil Nadu: a dancer

*Manipulation technique:
String puppets of Tamil Nadu*





Costuming of the Andhra style of marionettes

design they are similar to the Tanjavur style of puppet figures.

Kalasutri Bahulye of Maharashtra

Literally *Kala* means an ingenious contrivance (the 'l' of *Kala* has a harsher sound in between l and d). *Sutri* and

String puppet of Tamil Nadu: Hanuman

Andhra puppets similar to string puppets of Tamil Nadu (Tanjavur style): the court of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka

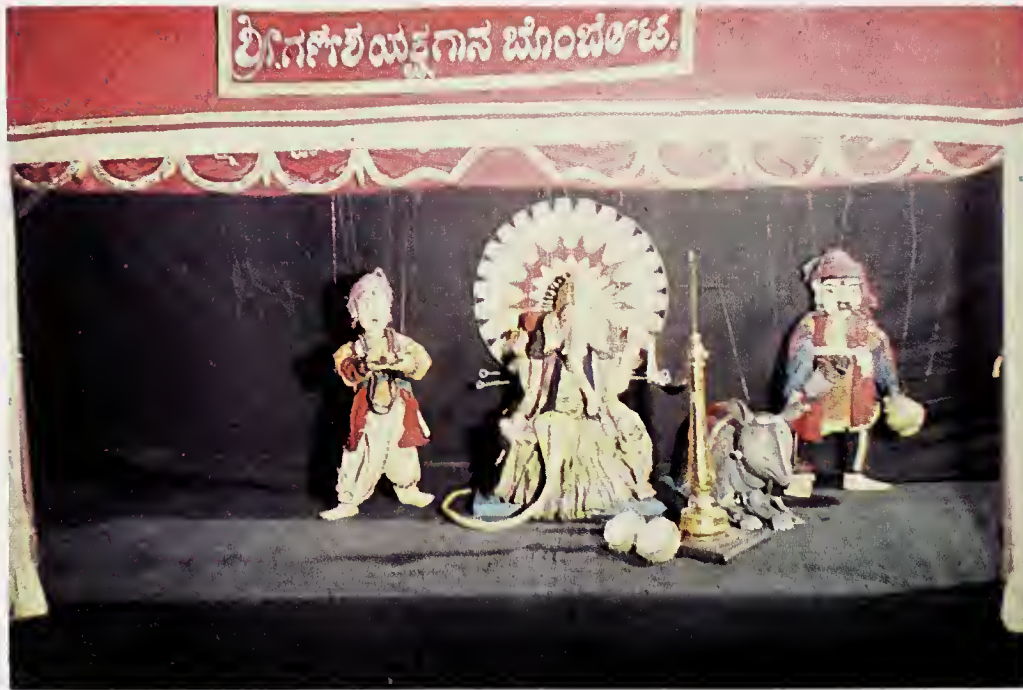


Bahulye respectively mean thread and dolls. Thus *Kalasutri Bahulye* means dolls which are ingeniously moved by thread.

So far only one traditional puppeteer group has been located in the village Kudal of Ratnagiri district bordering Goa.

Kalasutri puppets are highly stylized and present exclusively stories from Ramayana. Like their counterparts in Rajasthan and Orissa, they do not have legs but long trailing skirts. Most puppets have only two joints at the

String puppets of Karnataka: preliminary of worshipping the elephant-headed god Ganesha



String puppet of Maharashtra: Ravana, the ten headed demon



String puppet of Maharashtra: Tadaka, the demoness

shoulders. Usually three strings are attached to a puppet figure. One string is attached to the top of the head by which the figure is suspended; the other two are attached to the jointed hands. Although very simple, *Kalasutri Bahulye* is a fascinating puppet theatre. Manipulation of the puppets is not complicated but imaginative. The music draws heavily from the folk tunes of the region.

Gombe-atta of Karnataka

Karnataka string-puppet theatre is called *Gombe-atta*, which literally means dance of puppets (*Gombe*—

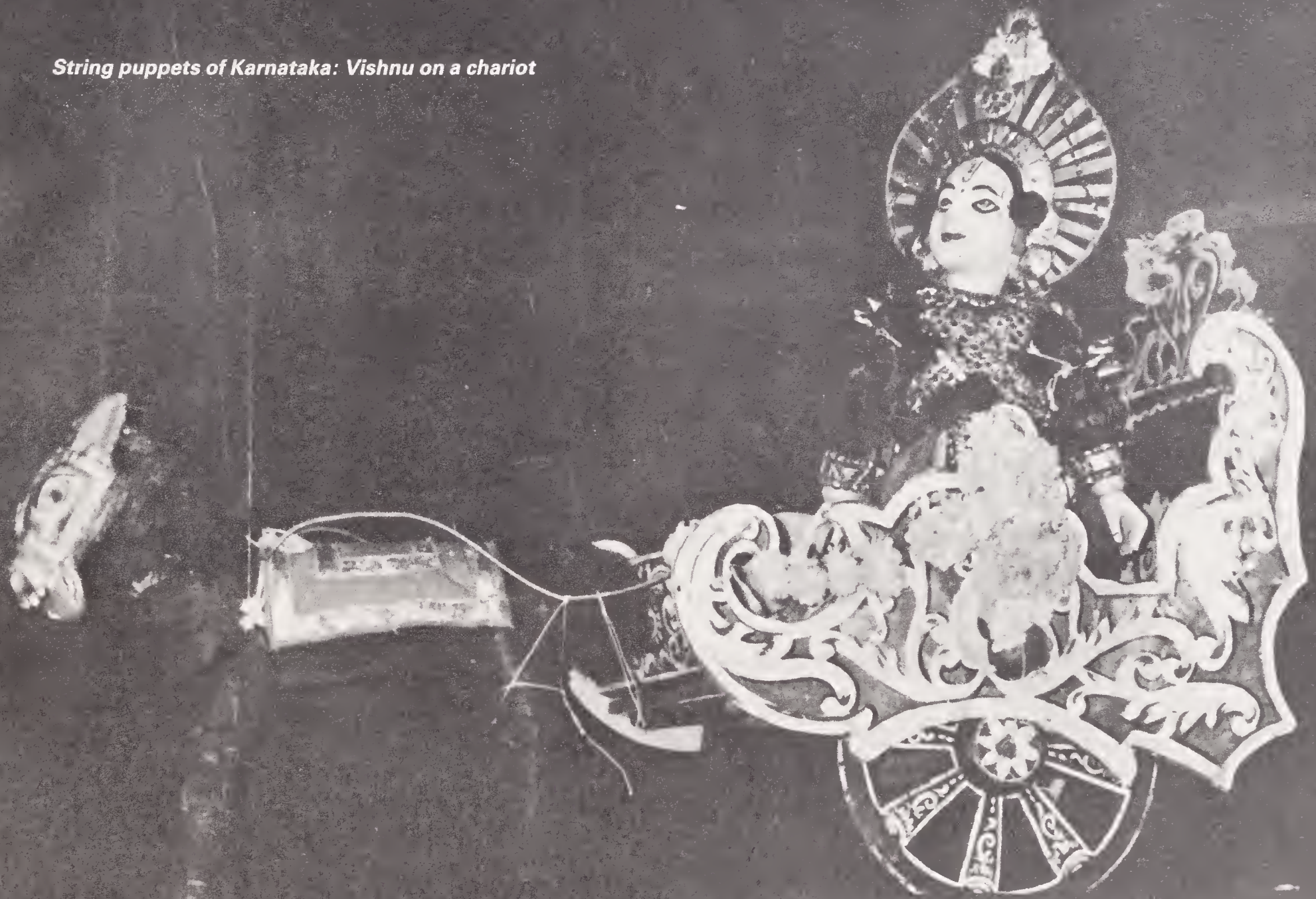
Marionette theatre of Karnataka that uses rods instead of strings



Puppet making: string puppets of Karnataka style



String puppets of Karnataka: Vishnu on a chariot





Manipulation technique: string puppets of Karnataka

puppet; *atta* dance). It closely follows *Yakshagana*, the traditional live theatre form of the region. The puppet figures are highly stylized and appear just like the made-up and costumed *Yakshagana* actor. They have rounded figures with legs, and joints at shoulders, elbows, hips and knees. A few figures have joints also at ankles. Five or

String puppet of Karnataka: a demon



Manipulation technique being explained to school children by a puppeteer of Karnataka

more strings attached to a puppet figure are invariably tied to rod-like wooden props. Each puppeteer generally manipulates one puppet, but when some complicated movements are required to be executed two or three puppeteers co-operate to manipulate one figure.

Gombe-atta presents regular *Yakshagana* plays known as *prasangas* which are based on episodes drawn from epics and puranas. If a *prasanga* climaxes in a confrontation between two major characters of the play it is designated as *kalaga*. If the main theme is courtship or wedlock it is respectively denoted as *parinaya* or *kalyana*. Invariably a battle scene is shown in almost every *prasanga* so as to heighten the drama.

The music, like that of *Yakshagana* theatre, is highly dramatic as it beautifully blends folk and classical elements. *Gombe-atta* puppets having many joints are perhaps the most versatile of all traditional string-puppets of India. Being highly stylized each puppet figure is in itself a work of art, especially those representing demons.

Karnataka has also another kind of string-puppet which resembles *Bommalatam* puppets.

Putla-nach of Assam

Putla means a doll and *nach*, dance. There is strong evidence that Assam had a strong tradition of string-puppet theatre. From this, Shankaradeva drew some elements while shaping, in the 16th century, the stylized traditional human theatre known as *Bhaona* theatre, the plays of which are known as *Ankianat*. A traditional performer of *Putla-nach* could not be located, but there are strong reasons to believe that a few are still performing this traditional type of puppetry in remote rural areas of Assam.



Kerala shadow puppet showing how they are coloured although they throw black-and-white shadows

Shadow-Theatre

SHADOW-THEATRE, which is also known as shadow-play or shadow-show, is different from all other forms of theatre, including the various types of puppetry already discussed. On the human and puppet stages a real world of three-dimensional space is created in which actors or puppet figures are directly seen by the audience. The effect of the shadow-theatre is always indirect although it is a type of puppetry in which flat figures, usually made of leather, are lightly pressed on a translucent screen with a strong source of light behind. The audience sits on the other side of the screen and sees the shadows moving when the figures are manipulated. Thus, spectators and actors separated by the screen are placed as if in different rooms. The spectator is by himself and his feeling of isolation is heightened by the darkness all around. He does not directly contact the figures; he only sees the image, the projection. The light screen is most important here as it filters and modifies the action. On the other side of the screen too, the actor-manipulator is isolated. He presents

a projection of his thoughts and expects the spectator to interpret and re-assemble them into a new image. It is not the puppet figure in his hand but its image on the screen that decides his action. In his fantasy there are thoughts and ideas. He translates them into moving pictures. In the mind of the audience these pictures are retranslated into happenings. This perhaps makes shadow-theatre an exciting experience.

Many scholars consider shadow theatre to be the oldest of all theatre forms. While some believe that shadow theatre began in India, others are emphatic about its origin in China. Those who hold the latter view draw support from a Chinese legend which tells of Wu'ti, an emperor of the Han dynasty who reigned some hundred and fifty years before the Christian era. The emperor being heart-broken at the death of his favourite concubine commanded his court magicians to summon her spirit. One of them, using a darkened chamber and a distant screen, was able to create a shadow which resembled that of the dead concubine and the emperor was apparently satisfied.

There is a similar legend about the origin of Turkish shadow theatre. It can not be denied that legends often contain facts of an obscure past, but it is equally true that they are highly coloured by imagination and therefore cannot be relied upon as historical evidence.

Paintings and writings dating back to the early part of Sung dynasty (A.D. 960 to 1279), however, provide definite evidence of the existence of shadow theatre in China.

The tradition of shadow theatre in Java seems to be equally ancient. There is a reference to the Javanese shadow theatre, known as *Wayang Kulit*, in the inscription attributed to Bali Tung (A.D. 890 to 910).

Most of those who hold the view that shadow theatre first originated in China base their arguments on the assumption that Hindus had no tradition in shadow theatre. This certainly betrays a lack of information. There is a reference to shadow play in the Tamil epic *Silapadikaram* which is believed to have been written between second century B.C. and first century A.D. Pischel and Luders are of the opinion that the famous Sanskrit drama *Mahanataka* was originally written as a play for shadow theatre. Winternitz also holds the view that *Mahanataka* has great resemblance with plays written for Javanese shadow theatre. It has not been fixed yet when exactly *Mahanataka* was written, but it was surely earlier than A.D. 850 since Ananda Vardhana of the 9th century quotes it in his writings.

Dutangada, another dramatic work by Subhata of 13th century A.D. is expressly designated as *Chhayanataka* which literally means shadow theatre. The term has however raised some controversy amongst scholars. Dr. S.K. De in his *History of Sanskrit Literature* has summarised the various interpretations of the term *Chhayanataka* by different scholars:

- i) 'Outline of a drama or entr'acte'—Wilson and Rajendra Lal Mitra
- ii) 'Shadow of a drama or half-drama'—Pischel
- iii) 'A drama in the state of shadows'—Levi

Dr. De himself is, however, of the opinion that the term *Chhayanataka* does not mean shadow theatre. One can hold such a view if the following definite evidences are ignored:

- (a) *Dharmabhyudaya* of Meghaprabhacharya has been designated as a *Chhayanataka*. Though the date for this drama is not certain, one of the stage directions in it reads, "...from behind the screen a puppet dressed as a sage is to be brought on to the screen".
- (b) Age-old traditions of shadow theatre in varying styles still survive in some regions of Orissa, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.
- (c) In *Ullargharaghava*, another *Chhayanataka* by Somesvara written in the 13th century, a dialogue between two characters reads as follows:

"Vrikamukha : Friend, the images of Rama and Lakshmana which I carry in my heart, have been depicted in this picture (*patrapata*) for the pleasure of my Lord. Please have a look at it.
(He gives the picture)

Karpatika : (Taking it and looking at it) Well done, great man, well done. This has been beautifully painted according to the conventions of shadow theatre (*Chhayanatyanusarena*)."

One who has little idea about the presentational techniques of traditional Indian shadow theatre would hasten to believe that the word *patrapata* means any picture on a flat surface as has been interpreted by R. Upadhyaya in an article 'Meaning of Chhayanataka' in the *Charudeva Shastri Felicitation Volume* (p. 527). Those who have not seen *Togalu Gombatta*, the traditional shadow theatre of Karnataka, are likely to be confused how a painting could be shown in a shadow show. *Togalu Gombatta* adopts an interesting technique of presenting at times a composite colourful scene depicted by one puppet-figure. These highly decorative scenes or 'group-figures' are brought onto the screen to punctuate and intensify the dramatic effect in the same way as 'freeze-shots' are used in movies. There are strict iconographic conventions for the delineation of these colourful group-figures. Therefore, when Karpatika says in the above mentioned dialogue that the picture is painted according to the conventions of shadow theatre, it clearly indicates that it is not a picture painted in the usual way and hence not a picture-scroll. There are distinct differences in the conventions of stylized delineation of characters in shadow theatre from those in the picture-scrolls like *Pabuji-ke-phad* of Rajasthan. Therefore, Somesvara deliberately used the word *Chhayanatyanusarena* which otherwise becomes redundant.

The preceding discussion unmistakably proves that India has a very ancient tradition of shadow theatre which has undoubtedly been referred to as *Chhayanataka*. The fact that this branch of theatre is not mentioned in the

Natyashastra nor considered under the *rupakas* and *upa-rupakas* can also be explained.

All the ancient treatise on performing arts, especially on dance and theatre, deal in great detail only with sophisticated and highly evolved forms which more often than not flourished under royal patronage. No due attention was paid to the art-forms prevalent among common people. Therefore, folk forms have always been referred to in the passing and have perhaps never been dealt with in detail. Again, Indian dramaturgists were solely preoccupied with human theatre. Various types of puppetry including shadow theatre, which have a folk character, were not considered in any of the treatises on dramaturgy.

It is indeed very fortunate that shadow theatre, having an unbroken tradition of more than two thousand years, now also survives in varying styles in Orissa, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. While the former three styles project silhouette-like black and white shadows, the latter three throw beautifully coloured shadows on the screen.

Ravanachhaya of Orissa

The Orissa shadow theatre is known as *Ravanachhaya* which literally means the shadow of Ravana. It is interesting to note that although in this style of shadow theatre the theme is exclusively based on the Rama-story, it is named after Ravana. Forms of shadow theatre surviving in other parts of the country, which will be discussed later, are all named in such a way that each literally means ‘dance of

the leather-dolls’ in the language of their respective region of prevalence. This manner of naming the form has not been followed in Orissa.

An explanation is readily offered for naming the form as *Ravanachhaya* instead of *Ramachhaya*, which is as follows. Rama is a god. As in Sanskrit so in Oriya the word for god is *devata* which is derived from the root ‘*div*’ meaning ‘to shine’. *Devata* is, therefore, a being that is luminous. A luminous body does not cast its own shadow. Again, Rama is no minor god but the incarnation of God and therefore, compounding *chhaya* with Rama to name the form would be philosophically incongruous. The plausibility of the explanation is strengthened by the fact that the puppeteers, at times, refer to this form as *Ramanataka* — the drama of Rama — but when the word *chhaya* is compounded it is always *Ravanachhaya*.

Plausibility of the explanation is, however, questioned by the fact that the puppet representing Rama does cast a shadow on the screen in actuality and the puppet figure is designed in no special way. On the other hand the Ravana figure looks towering in comparison with that of Rama. Of course, Ravana has been so characterised in *Ramayana* as to inspire the imagination of the original puppet designer for a stylistic treatment. Nevertheless, the figure of Rama looks too insignificant in comparison with Ravana, the figure representing whom is much larger and more boldly and dramatically conceived. This leads us to believe that *Ravanachhaya* during its formative period was greatly influenced by Jainism and Buddhism which held their sway in this region from third century

B.C. to sixth century A.D. Some versions of Rama-story written by authors subscribing to any of the two religions paid more respect to Ravana than to Rama.

We do not know the version of Rama-story that *Ravanachhaya* followed earlier, but for the last hundred

years or so it has been following the text of the *Vichitra Ramayana* by Vishvanath Khuntia, a medieval Oriya poet.

Ravanachhaya puppets are made of deer skin and being opaque cast black and white shadows. The puppet

Ravanachhaya of Orissa Citizens of Ayodhya



figures representing different *dramatic personae* are conceived in bold dramatic poses. They have no jointed limbs and to keep them straight, split bamboo sticks are

attached vertically, which provide the handle at the lower end. Many props such as trees, mountains, chariots, etc., are also used for creating an appropriate set-up.

Marriage of Sita



Of the various Indian shadow-puppets, those of *Ravanachhaya* are the most abstract and simple in presentation. The deer skin used to make a figure is treated

minimally, that is, not so elaborately as especially in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. At times, even the fur is not scrapped off the skin and there are many old figures

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita going in exile





Ravana coming to abduct Sita

having the spotted coat of deer on one side. Stencilling is done apparently with great naivety, but with amazing strength and vitality. The figures off the screen look neither artistic nor attractive, but their shadows formed by the shimmering golden light of the oil lamp acquire a breathtaking beauty.

Although *Ravanachhaya* puppets are small in size — the largest being not more than 2½ feet in height — and have no jointed limbs, they create very powerful yet lyrical shadows, especially when manipulated in a peculiar jerky movement.

Sita captivated in Ashoka Vatika and guarded by Lankinis



*Hanuman, expanding his body, is taking a leap
across the sea to locate Sita in Lanka*



A bowl-shaped earthen lamp filled with castor-oil and lighted with two thick wicks made of cotton rags soaked in oil, forms the light source. This lamp is placed on a stand made of a bamboo stick with small wooden plank fixed to one side of it. The height of the stand is so adjusted that the lamp is about twelve to fifteen inches from the bottom of the screen at the central line. The distance between lamp and screen is at the most twelve inches. The puppeteers sit on the ground and insert required puppet figures in between the lamp and the screen. The leader of the group stands on the other side of the screen in full view of the audience. He holds in his hands a *Khanjani*, a type of small tambourine, and plays on it while singing. A vocalist often assists him from behind the screen. The leader and the manipulators behind the screen provide the impromptu prose dialogues for the puppets.

The soul of a *Ravanachhaya* performance is music. The style of singing blends both folk and classical Odissi traditions and is similar to that of *Pala Gaana* and *Daskathia*, two forms of dramatic balladry, the former being highly sophisticated both in form and content. In *Ravanachhaya* percussive accompaniment is provided by *Khanjani*, the frame drum and *Daskathi*, a type of castanet.

Since the puppets have no jointed limbs there is little scope for gimmickry in *Ravanachhaya*. Those who are impressed only by the gimmicks in puppetry may find a *Ravanachhaya* show quite slow-moving and therefore boring. To appreciate the lyricity of the shadow, their solid graphic qualities, high degree of stylization and subtle suggestiveness, one has to have the right sensitivity as well as sensibility.

Manipulation technique: *Ravanachhaya* of Orissa,
backstage and frontstage perspectives





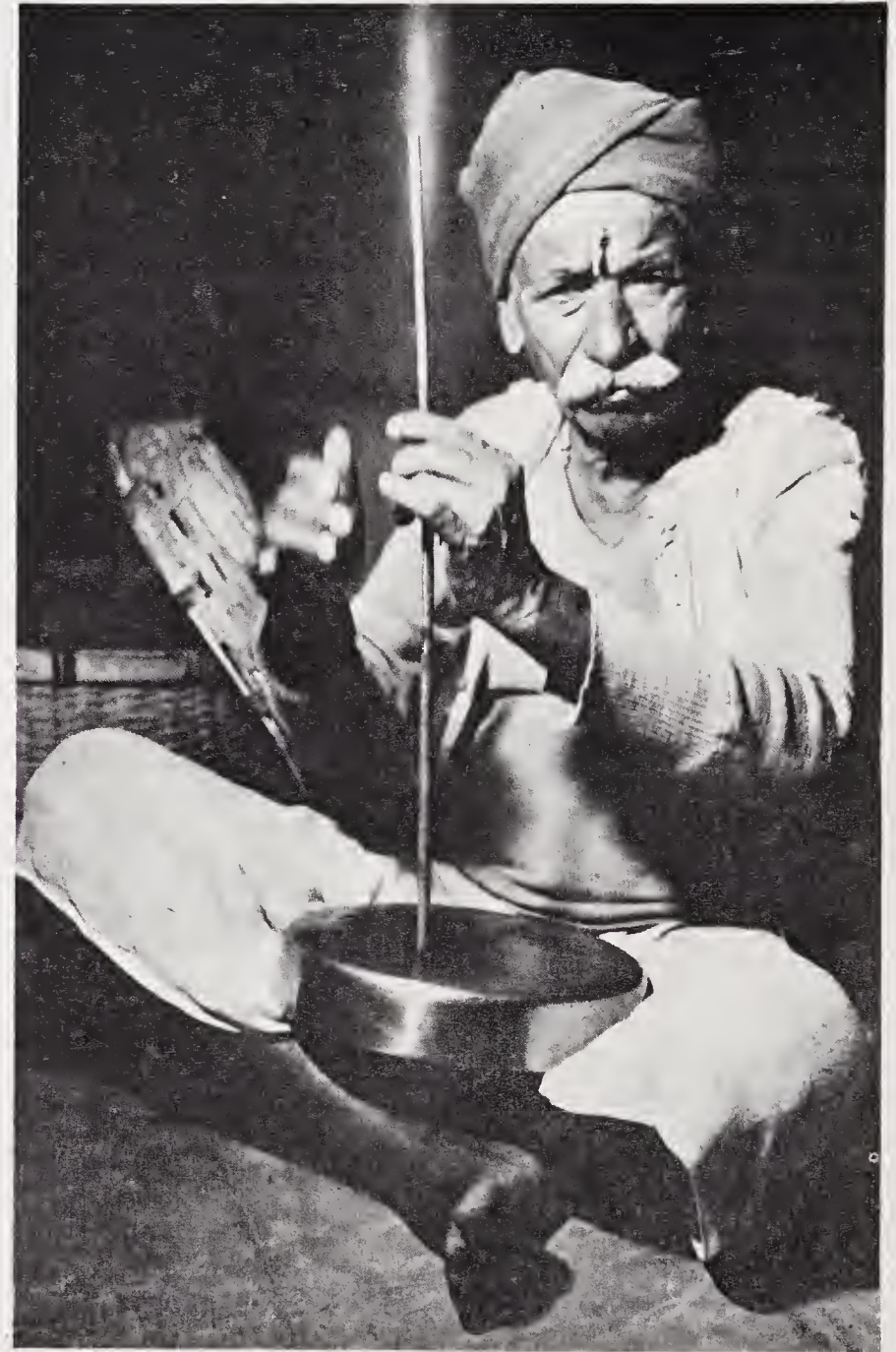
Chamdyacha Bahulye of Maharashtra

Chamdyacha Bahulye means puppets made of leather. The tradition is almost on the verge of extinction and the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, is now striving to help it to continue and revive itself. Only one group of traditional *Chamdyacha Bahulye* puppeteers has been located at Kudal village in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. The village is very close to the Goa border and there are reasons to believe that this style of shadow theatre was once prevalent in Goa also. The traditional puppeteers of Kudal know how to present the shadow play with the old puppets handed down to them by their forefathers, but they do not know the art of making the leather puppets.

Chamdyacha Bahulye puppets like those of *Ravanachhaya* have no jointed limbs and cast black and white shadows. A close examination, however, reveals that they are very delicately coloured, most probably, with vegetable dyes. Many puppets are either 'group-figures' or a single character with a highly stylized setting.

Chamdyacha Bahulye like *Ravanachhaya* deals exclusively with Rama legend. The puppet stage for the show is traditionally improvised within half an hour. When put up, the stage looks like a cubicle. Inside it only one puppeteer squats on the ground with the leather puppets arranged in order of their presentation. An oil fed iron lamp with a hooked handle hangs from above.

*Vata the drone accompaniment
with shadow puppets of Maharashtra*



On the left side of the improvised stage the vocalist and musical accompanists sit in full view of the audience.

They sing the text which is entirely in oral tradition. According to the demand of the songs the puppeteer brings onto the screen different puppet figures which are manipulated minimally. In fact, the show is more a visual illustration of the narrative songs than the complicated art of puppetry.

Of the musical instruments which accompany the vocal music, the most interesting is a kind of drone known as *vata*. The player puts a thin bronze plate upside down on his lap. At a point away from the centre of the circular back of the plate, which faces upwards, a dot of wax is stuck. On this dot the player puts a lean stick and rubs it with his forefinger and thumb in a special manner so that a delicate droning sound is produced. The note produced by this drone serves as the keynote of the vocalist.

Although it is difficult to say exactly when *Chamdyacha Bahulye* originated, it is interesting to note that most of the traditional shadow-puppeteers of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka speak among themselves a language which can be called degenerated Marathi. This leads to the belief that at one time Maharashtra perhaps had a very strong tradition in shadow theatre and the puppeteers migrated to Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka for some reason or other. With them their art also migrated and acquired a different character, being influenced by the prevailing culture of the regions.

Thol Pava-kuthu of Kerala

The shadow theatre of Kerala is locally known as *Thol Pava-kuthu* which literally means dance of the leather dolls or puppets (*Thol* — leather, *Pava* — doll or puppet, *Kuthu* — dance).

The art now survives only in the Palghat district of the State and is traditionally performed as a ritual worship of goddess Bhagavati or Bhadrakali. According to a local legend, goddess Bhadrakali could not watch the fight between Rama and Ravana, in which the latter symbolising the evil forces was vanquished, since she was at that time engaged in fighting with Darika, a demon who proved too powerful to be conquered by the gods and whom she killed in the long run. Hence, *Thol Pava-kuthu* dealing exclusively with Rama legend is performed in front of a temple of the goddess for her to watch the performance. In front of many Bhadrakali temples permanent structures, known as *Kuthumadam*, have been built where shadow play is performed as an annual ritual ceremony lasting 7 to 21 days. Of these temples, the one at Aryan-kavu near Shoranur is famous for its annual shadow play performance for 21 days.

A traditional puppeteer is called *pulavar* which literally means a knowledgeable person. A *pulavar*, in fact, has to have a phenomenal memory and he is to be well conversant with various literary works on Rama legend, although *Thol Pava-kuthu* draws maximum inspiration from the Tamil Ramayana written by Kambar. Generally, *pulavars*

Shadow theatre of Kerala: Hanuman in Ravana's court



belong to two communities, namely *Vellalachetty* and *Nair*, which according to the social hierarchy are much lower than *Brahmins*.

It is believed that about 350 years ago there was a very knowledgeable Ramayana scholar named Chinnathampi who belonged to the Vellalachetty community. The story goes that his great love for the Rama story made him one day go and listen to a recitation of Ramayana by a well known Brahmin scholar. The members of the audience, being of higher caste Hindus, ordered Chinnathampi to leave the place and out of earshot. Since he was of such a lowly caste, it was felt to be a sacrilege if he was to even hear the sacred text of the Ramayana. The humiliation, however, did not diminish Chinnathampi's love for Rama story, rather it inspired him to shape *Thol Pava-kuthu*, presenting the story both visually and orally so that people irrespective of caste could share with him the ecstasy. The legend may or may not have been based on facts, but it does give an idea how rigid and bigoted the caste system had become.

The play for the shadow show which, according to requirement, blends both prose and versified passages, is called *adalpatt* (literally, *adal* — acting; *patt* — relating to). Collectively the versified passages are called *Kuthu-kavil* or *Kuthu-kavikal* which draws heavily upon the *Kamba-Ramayana* in Tamil. The prose passages are in a language which is a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam, the local language. This leads to the surmise that the Vellalachetty community migrated from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu.

Although *Thol Pava-kuthu* is performed as a ritual temple ceremony once a year, mostly during March-April, at other times it may also be performed as a votive offering commissioned by a devotee of the goddess Bhadrakali.

The Kerala leather puppets are opaque like those of Orissa and throw black and white shadows on the screen, yet it is interesting to note that they are coloured. Indonesian shadow puppets are also coloured although they are opaque. There was a tradition in Indonesia that during the show while women used to sit on the front side of the screen so that they could see the moving shadows, men used to sit on the other side and therefore could see the actual puppets, and for them the puppets were made colourful. It is not known if such a tradition was there in Kerala but now the audience, irrespective of sex, sits on the front side of the screen to see the shadows. Why then are the puppets coloured? There is no satisfactory answer to it. Some explain that colour is applied to the figures to protect the leather from insects and fungus growth. This, however, does not sound quite convincing.

Thol Pava-kuthu puppets have either one or both hands jointed. There are also figures representing trees, palace, mountains, etc. All figures are superbly stencilled and highly stylized. At times a complete scene is delineated in one puppet figure, such as Sita in Ashoka Vatika. The figures are mostly two and half to three and half feet high.

Thol Pava-kuthu uses a rather longish screen which is about twelve feet by four and half feet. A series of oil fed

lamps, in multiples of 7, are placed on an improvised stand that runs through the entire horizontal length of the screen. On the performance day after sunset the puppeteer goes to the temple to light the traditional lamp which is brought to the *Thol Pava-kuthu* stage. From this lamp a number of oil-soaked wicks are lighted, which are placed on oil-filled coconut shells put on the improvised stand in a row spaced about six to nine inches apart. The puppeteers stand behind the row of lamps and insert the puppets in between the lamp and the screen.

A long ritual preliminary precedes the show, after the traditional lamp is brought from the temple to the *Thol Pava-kuthu* stage. After the preliminary, the first shadow to appear on screen is that representing the elephant headed god Ganesha. Two or four characters representing devotees of Lord Ganesha dance beside him to the rhythm of the eulogy sung for invoking the god. Then the play proper beings.

The puppeteers themselves sing and deliver the sparse prose dialogues which are also delivered in stylized recitative manner. The verbal content of the puppet-play is highly operatic. The music draws heavily upon the rich folk tunes of the region and has traces of Karnatic classical music. Generally two musical instruments accompany the vocal music: *Ezhuppara*, an hour-glass shaped drum and *Ilataalam*, a kind of cymbals. On special occasions drums called *Chenda* and *Maddalam*, and a double-reed aerophone called *Kurumkuzhal* are also added to the orchestra.

Tholu Bommalata of Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh perhaps has the strongest tradition in shadow theatre which is locally known as *Tholu Bommalata*, literally meaning dance of leather puppets (*Tholu* — leather, *Bommalata* — puppet dance). In a small village called Madhavapatnam, about 6 km away from Kakinada, there are more than 50 families of traditional shadow-puppeteers. There are also other villages in the State where shadow-puppeteers live, but they have all taken to other professions since they cannot earn their livelihood by performing shadow theatre alone.

The brightly coloured Andhra leather puppets are the largest among various shadow puppet styles. They range from four to six feet in height and are quite versatile, having jointed shoulders, elbows, knees and sometimes also the waist, neck and ankles.

The styles in which coloured shadows are projected on the screen, that is the shadow theatre traditions prevalent in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, follow almost similar process for making the puppet figures. Leather puppets of Andhra style are now usually made of goat skin. Earlier the figures representing godly characters were being made of deer skin. This practice is now not followed. After removing the fur the raw skin is soaked in a solution of salt and alum in water for 12 hours or more. It is then stretched tight by nailing it on a plank. When completely dry, it is carefully scrapped to desired thinness so that it acquires translucency. Different parts of a puppet figure are then drawn out according to traditional icono-



Shadow theatre of Andhra Pradesh: a sage

graphy. For this, an old puppet figure is usually used as the model. When the parts are cut out of the skin they are appropriately coloured with vegetable dyes. The main colours used are different shades of red and blue, black and yellow. There is a traditional colour scheme as part of the iconography, which is strictly followed. The next step is to perforate the part if required, for delineating jewellery etc. The eyes of a puppet figure, however, are not painted at this stage, since it is believed that once the eyes

Puppet making: Shadow puppets of Andhra style



are painted the figure is infused with 'life'. Therefore, this is done only after the parts are jointed together to form the rounded figure. After the puppet figure is completed a slim bamboo stick is tied to keep the puppet figure straight when it is lightly pressed on the screen and manipulated. Nowadays many puppeteers use chemical colours in place of vegetable dyes since the former are easily available and also work out to be cheaper, but they being loud and gaudy lack the dignity and pleasing effect of the latter. Again, many of the traditional shadow-puppeteers have started using gaslight as the light source instead of the oil fed lamps. As a result the shadows appear harder, lacking lyricity. The shimmering golden yellow light of the oil fed lamps impart to the shadows a rare aesthetic charm and lyricity besides enriching their colours.

Once the puppet figures are completed and their eyes are painted, those representing gods are not mixed with the evil ones. They are kept in separate baskets. This practice is more or less followed in all shadow theatre traditions of India.

In *Tholu Bommalata*, for traditional lighting two iron brackets are hung from the ceiling of the improvised stage so that they reach the vertical mid-points of the screen on both the sides. On these iron brackets either oil soaked torches or two huge lamps are lighted. Since the puppet figures are very large the screen is usually eight to ten feet in height and not less than twelve feet in length. To facilitate manipulation of puppet figures which for clarity of shadows are required to be lightly pressed on the screen, it is slightly tilted towards the audience. Puppeteers stand

and manipulate the figures by holding the tied bamboo stick at the middle. The articulation of different limbs is done by a stick with a nail at one end.

A *Pooja* is performed before the shadows appear on the screen in which with chanting of *mantras* a coconut is broken into two and joss-sticks are burnt. The musical instruments are sanctified with the burning joss-sticks. Then the lamps on the iron brackets are lighted and the audience sees the shadow of Lord Ganesha. The puppet-figure representing the god, is pinned to the screen much before the lighting of the lamps. After the invocation of Ganesha the play proper begins.

Traditionally *Tholu Bommalata* used to be performed during the festival of Mahashivaratri outside a Shiva temple though the theme of the play could be based on episodes from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* or Krishna legend. There are some stock characters such as, *Killekyata* the clown, and *Bangaraka* his shrewish wife, who appear in almost every play.

The puppeteers stand behind the screen and manipulate the figures. At times they stamp their feet on two wooden planks to provide various sounds which are quite effective, especially when two characters are engaged in a fierce fight. The puppeteers also sing and deliver prose dialogues for the puppet figures. Their singing is supported by one or two vocalists. Percussive accompaniment is provided by *Maddalam*, a two faced drum and two to three pairs of *Talam* (cymbals). Harmonium is used only as a drone that provides the pitch for the vocalists. Though *Tholu Bommalata* music blends folk with



Shadow theatre of Andhra Pradesh: a dancer

Karnatic classical, the predominance of the latter is discernible.

In *Tholu Bommalata* the scene of fight between two characters is as dramatic as fascinating. Also, a dancing puppet can do intricate dance movements producing a most fascinating effect on the screen.

Tholu Bommalatam of Tamil Nadu

The tradition of shadow theatre in Tamil Nadu is almost on the brink of extinction. Only one puppeteer could be located and he too had started drifting away from the tradition. Since leather is costly and requires a complicated process to be transformed into a puppet figure, he had started using cardboards and coloured cellophane papers. He has, however, a few old leather puppets representing characters from *Ramayana* and Krishna legend. From these puppets it is evident that the shadow theatre of Tamil Nadu has many similarities with its counterpart in Andhra Pradesh. The puppet figures are, however, differently conceived and the iconography followed in delineating the mythological characters is different. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, is trying to revive the tradition. Department of Culture, Government of India, has also encouraged the only living puppeteer available to revive this age old art by giving him financial assistance in the way of a Fellowship.

Togalu Gombe-atta of Karnataka

Locally known as *Togalu Gombe-atta* (*Togalu* — leather, *Gomba-atta* — puppet dance), Karnataka



Manipulation technique: Shadow puppets of Tamil Nadu



Shadow theatre of Tamil Nadu: Rama and Ravana fighting

shadow theatre is as colourful and fascinating as that of Andhra Pradesh. The puppets are, however, smaller in size, the largest figure being not more than three and half feet. They too have many joints at shoulders, elbows, knees, ankles and in some even at the neck and the waist. There are also puppet figures representing trees, various kinds of weapons, animals, etc.

In fact, in Karnataka two styles of shadow play are pre-

valent. One uses large puppet figures, almost like that of Andhra Pradesh, the other uses smaller puppet figures which are locally known as *chikka*, literally meaning small. These *chikka* puppets are typical of Karnataka.

The most distinctive feature of *chikka* type of *Togalu Gombeyatta* is in the use of highly decorative group-figures. As said earlier, in one figure a whole scene is depicted in a beautifully stylized way. These highly decorative group figures are brought onto the screen to punctuate and intensify the dramatic effect in a similar way as 'freeze shot' is used in movies. For example, when abduction of Sita by Ravana is shown, at first there are two puppet figures, one representing Sita and the other Ravana. They are manipulated to suggest that Ravana in

Shadow theatre of Karnataka (chikka puppets): a composition



*Shadow theatre of Karnataka:
a mythical bird*

*Shadow theatre of Karnataka:
a warrior with a bow and multiple arrows*



the guise of a mendicant comes to beg alms from Sita. When she gives the alms, he assumes his real appearance with ten heads. At this point the smaller figure representing Ravana as mendicant is substituted by the usual figure in which ten heads have been delineated. Then Ravana forcibly drags Sita and both the figures are taken gradually to one side and finally out of the screen. Immediately a group figure is brought onto the screen. It shows a colourful flying chariot representing the *Pushpak-Viman* on which Sita and Ravana are seated. At times, the group figures too have jointed parts and in this case one hand of Sita is jointed to the group figure which is moved to suggest that Sita is weeping while removing some of her ornaments and dropping them so that Rama will come to know about her abduction. When the group figure has no moving part it is like a still picture — dramatically, a scene in freeze.

Togalu Gombe-atta like *Tholu Bommalata* of Andhra Pradesh draws themes for its plays from the epics and puranic literatures and has a number of stock characters like clowns, dancers, etc., which are presented in almost all the plays.

The puppeteers usually squat on the ground and manipulate. At times, they stand while manipulating. The traditional light source is somewhat similar to that in Kerala style. On an improvised stand a row of small earthen oil fed lamps are put. Length of the screen is, however, smaller in comparison to the *Thol Pava-kuthu* stage since the puppet figures are smaller.

Before the lamps are lighted the figure representing



Lord Ganesha is put on the screen. On both sides of Ganesha are put two worshippers and trees on which birds including peacocks perch. A *pooja* is performed at the back stage in which a coconut is broken into two and offered to the elephant headed god. Then the lamps are lighted and the audience sees the colourful shadows on the screen. The musicians begin the invocation of Ganesha when the figures representing the worshippers are moved rhythmically. Soon after the invocation is over the figures are removed from the screen and a dancing figure representing goddess Saraswati is brought onto the screen. The musicians start singing an eulogy to the goddess while the figure representing her executes a fascinating dance. After this the preliminaries are over and the play proper begins.

The puppeteers while manipulating the figures sing and deliver prose dialogues for the puppet characters. They are supported by one or two vocalists. Musical instruments used for accompaniment are: *Mukha-veena*, a short double-reeded aerophone like *Shehnai* but much shorter, producing also a shriller tone; *Dugi-tabla* which is a pair of drums which provide the main percussive accompaniment assisted by *Talam*, the cymbals. As in Andhra so also in Karnataka shadow theatre, harmonium is used only as a drone for the key-note of the singers. *Togalu Gombu-atta* music is basically inspired by the folk tunes of the region, but there are traces of both Karnatic and Hindustani schools of classical music.

*Shadow theatre of Karnataka, group figure:
Rama fighting from a chariot*



*Shadow theatre of Karnataka
group figure with a moving part:
Sita being abducted by Ravana in a flying chariot*

We have briefly discussed the major types of traditional Indian puppets, but perhaps they do not exhaust all the varieties which still survive in remote rural areas. Before 1978 few knew about the existence of *Chamdyacha Bahulye* and *Kalasutri Bahulye* of Maharashtra and *Tholu Bommalatam* of Tamil Nadu. It is possible that later on a few more kinds of traditional puppetry may be discovered as surviving in some parts of the country.



Contemporary Puppet Theatre

ALTHOUGH India is said to be the home of puppetry and the country has the longest and the richest tradition in this art, the contemporary creations are perhaps still in their infancy. In the cultural scene today, puppetry occupies a very insignificant place. Theatre workers of India are yet to awaken to the potentiality of the puppets which offer immense scope as a powerful means of dramatic expression. In the West, which has a much feebler tradition, the revival of interest in puppetry has been tremendous in the recent years. The dry bones of old traditional puppetry have been reinvigorated with new blood and talent. Puppets have been successfully introduced in many new spheres of activity, such as education, therapeutics, rehabilitation of handicapped children, propaganda, advertising, cinema, and television. The West has come to recognise that there is no limit to the power of puppets to provide aesthetic entertainment. In countries like USA, USSR, France, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Canada, etc., puppetry is now so

developed that it claims equal status with that of the human theatre. In Asia, it is only Japan which can claim to have taken contemporary puppet theatre to the heights reached by the West. Though India has a much poorer fare to offer in contemporary puppet theatre, there are a few sensitive and dedicated groups who are trying to enliven the dull scene with their interesting productions.

About two decades ago the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, under the guidance of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, conducted an extensive survey of the surviving puppet

*Contemporary puppets drawing inspiration from the Kathputlis of Rajasthan:
a scene from Dholamaroo, a Rajasthani legend*



Puppet making: Contemporary puppets

theatre traditions of this country. It is perhaps the first organisation to make an attempt for the revival of this beautiful art. The leader of the survey team was Inder Razdan, a sensitive puppet theatre worker who did a good job in identifying many traditional puppeteers languishing in remote rural areas. He still has a good collection of old puppets from various parts of the country, a few of which are exhibited in the SMM Theatre Crafts gallery in New Delhi. A group of traditional Kathputli puppeteers origi-

nally belonging to Rajasthan are now working under him and producing plays like *Amar Singh Rathore* drawing heavily upon traditional techniques. These productions can therefore not be termed as modern, although they are not strictly traditional.

Inspired by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Leena Mangaldas of Shreyas School in Gujarat, Meher Contractor, an imaginative art teacher came to the field of

Contemporary puppets: Chanda Bai and party at the court of a Peshwa



puppetry about three decades ago and may perhaps be called one of the pioneers of contemporary Indian puppetry. Having learnt the art from Dr. Marjorie B. Mac Pharlin of USA, she has been doing excellent work especially in educational puppetry. The well known Bharata Natyam dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai founded, years ago, the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts in Ahmedabad. The Academy has a Puppet wing, which from its inception is under the guidance of Meher Contractor. Her recent production '*Rustam and Sohrab*', inspired by the huge Andhra style of coloured shadow puppets, is fascinating. One of her disciples Dadi Padumjee, a young and sensitive puppeteer, is also doing excellent work under the Puppet section of Sri Ram Centre of Art and Culture, New Delhi. It is perhaps the first institution in the metropolis which is presenting puppet shows almost every week.

Amongst the pioneers of contemporary Indian puppetry, the name of late Devilal Samar shines as a bright star. He, with admirable zeal and dedication, founded the Lok Kala Mandal of Udaipur, which is perhaps the most well organised institution in the field of puppetry. Sri Samar drew inspiration from both the traditional *Kathputli* puppeteers of Rajasthan and leading contemporary puppeters of the West. He also produced a few puppet plays adopting the black-theatre techniques.

The city of Calcutta is perhaps most active in the field of contemporary puppetry. There are more than half a dozen groups doing worthwhile experimentation with

puppets. Raghunath Goswami is perhaps the first to successfully experiment with rod puppets drawing inspiration from *Putul-nach* tradition. Initially he was associated with the Children's Little Theatre, but now has his own group under the name of Calcutta Puppets. Sri Goswami uses all forms of puppets and has a fine collection of traditional puppets of West Bengal. The most successful and popular contemporary puppeteer in Calcutta is Suresh Dutta who learnt the art from master puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov of USSR. Although his first production *Alladin* drew heavily upon techniques of his guru, the recent production *Ramayana* is magnificent. Sri Dutta excels in showmanship and his productions are as sleek as dramatically gripping. Amongst other groups in Calcutta, the Youth Puppet Theatre and the one headed by Sanjit Ghosh, nephew and disciple of Suresh Dutta, deserve mention.

In Bombay there are two puppet theatre groups, namely, the Indian Institute of Puppetry and the Indian Puppet Theatre, which are doing interesting experimentations. Ajay Paul of Udaipur, Mahipat Kavi of Ahmedabad, R.N.L. Srivatsava of New Delhi, as also Madhukar Master the ventriloquist of Bombay are also dedicated contemporary puppeteers doing experimentations, drawing inspiration from both traditional and modern techniques.

In the field of educational puppetry the Literacy House, Lucknow, under the guidance of J.L. Srivastav, and the Shreyas Foundation of Ahmedabad are doing consistent and praiseworthy work.

In the last one and half decades the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi at New Delhi has done commendable work for revival of interest in puppet theatre. Its former Secretary Suresh Awasthi was earlier closely associated with the Bharatiya Natya Sangh and took keen interest in the documentation and collection of various materials related to puppetry. The author of this book, when he joined the Akademi in 1970, was entrusted, among other things, the responsibility of implementing schemes aimed at reviving interest in both contemporary and traditional puppet theatre of the country. In 1977, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya became Chairman of the Akademi and Kapila Vatsyayan, the Vice-Chairman. Both are known for their abiding and keen interest in traditional forms of performing arts including puppetry. It is during their tenure that a new Plan Scheme namely 'Preservation and Promotion of Puppetry' was implemented under the supervision of your author. The Akademi, through its various schemes, has saved a few forms of traditional puppetry from sinking into oblivion, has given others their due recognition and encouragement, and has provided better opportunities for contemporary puppeteers to be exposed to a larger audience. It has been organising annual festivals and seminars on puppet theatre in which leading puppeteers, both traditional and contemporary, and sincere puppet theatre workers participate. These create an atmosphere in which there is a meaningful exchange of ideas and techniques between traditional and contemporary puppeteers. More important, the festivals, seminars, and conferment of the prestigious Akademi Awards on leading puppeteers have helped give them the feeling that their art is no longer neglected

by art connoisseurs. The Akademi has a good collection of various kinds of traditional puppets, hundreds of photographs and coloured slides, archival 16 mm films, and a documentary 16 mm film in colour on the shadow theatre tradition of this country scripted and directed by your author.

Contemporary puppeteers need more encouragement from their audience, most of whom have been blinded by the glamour of commercial movies which make anything genuinely aesthetic seem drab. But considering the popularity of the contemporary puppeteer Sri Suresh Dutta of Calcutta, who is always in great demand, one comes to the conclusion that for the time being, at least, until the taste of the audience is improved, showmanship should get priority over aesthetic considerations.

Although there is much to be desired in the quality of the contemporary puppet theatre of the country, it has now awakened to the fact that the traditional has many things to offer in both technique and content. This is quite heartening and fills one with hope that in the near future it may not only attain adulthood but develop a distinctive character of its own. Many contemporary puppeteers have realised that drawing inspiration from the West is all right, but to imitate it will hamper growth.

In India, there had always been a good deal of give-and-take between puppet theatre and human theatre in terms of theme, music, presentational techniques, and stage conventions. It is a pity that there is now no communication between the two. May be, contemporary

Indian human theatre still believes that it has neither anything to give nor take from puppet theatre, but fortunately, contemporary puppeteers do not seem to think so. One hopes that in the not too distant future contemporary human theatre will realise that long, long ago it was puppets which taught human beings that theatre can transcend ritualistic moorings to reach aesthetic heights. These inanimate figures moved by the hands of men once gave aesthetic pleasure through entertain-

ment on village greens and street corners, in fairs and festivals, in rustic barns and temple precincts. Their long history of unpretentious drama and simple mystification go back to the dawn of our civilisation. Now they struggle desperately for survival, yet these inanimate figures have in them the potentiality to give human actors a new direction, in fact, a new horizon. Once the human theatre realises this truth, both it and the puppet theatre can look forward to a brighter future.





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